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Interviewer: Could you start by telling me your name, and, if you don't mind, your age?

Darren Isted: Yes. I'm Darren Isted, and I am currently 45, so born in 1966.

Interviewer: What is your connection with the club? In what capacity are you here?

Darren Isted: A few capacities.

I was actually born and raised in Stevenage, so as a school child I came to watch the newly formed Stevenage Borough play at the ground at Broadhall Way, in their first season. I continue to watch them as a supporter.

As I was then going through college, etc., I wanted to get into journalism, so I then started to write about the club as well. I have done that basically for local newspapers the Herald, The Comet, for which I was a sports editor.

I also covered them for Three Counties Radio, which I worked for a few years, going home and away with them. Also for Sky

for a couple of games as well. I did some bits and pieces for Sky.

So it's kind of as a fan, as a hometown person, but also as somebody who works, and still works, in the media as well.

Interviewer: Can I take you back to your childhood then?

Darren Isted: Oh, dear. (Laughter) On the psychiatrist's chair.

Interviewer: Yes. (Laughter) How did your parents come to be in Stevenage? Were they one of the incomers?

Darren Isted: They were, yes. They were from the East End. All my family are basically from the East End of London. They were from Barking and Dagenham, and my grandparents were from the Isle of Dogs. I've got one sister. She was born in Dagenham when they were there.

My father worked, and actually my grandfather worked, for the Platignum Pen Factory, who relocated to Stevenage. I think they did that in the early 1960s.

So they all relocated. Basically I'm the only member of my family who is from Hertfordshire. Everyone else was from the darkest recesses of London.

Interviewer: What were your grandfathers and fathers football allegiances?

Darren Isted: Well, my father and the rest of my family are all West Ham fans, and they tried to get me to support West Ham at the beginning.

I'm a bit of an anomaly, because I had a year or so of trying to support Liverpool, but it didn't quite work, when I was very young.

Then I became a Mansfield Town fan, for no apparent reason. When I was in school I was the only person who – well, I was the only person in Stevenage who was a Mansfield Town fan. Yes, so I've carried that through, and Mansfield have always been my proper club.

I've gone through a very strange turnaround in the last few years, because Mansfield have gone out of the football league, whereas Stevenage have become quite a big league club. So my big team has now become my second team, and Stevenage, my little hometown non-league club, has gone and done very well for themselves.

Interviewer: When were you conscious of football? Can you remember when you became conscious of football?

Darren Isted: Yes, there is an exact moment, and I can't remember when it was. It was when I was vaguely supporting Liverpool. I think they were playing in Europe. This must have been 1972, something like that, so perhaps I was five.

I was asked to do a calendar at school, [Camps Hill 0:03:02] Junior School in Stevenage. We were given a calendar, and we were given the subject. We could put anything on there.

I think they wanted it to be a Christmas thing, but I drew a footballer diving, and it was Liverpool playing a Polish team, whose name was probably Legia Warsaw or something like that. That's what I wrote about on there. There's probably that memory.

Also everyone crowding around to watch the FA Cup Final, which was in 1973. We didn't have a colour television, but the grandparents did, so we all went round there. That was, I think, the Sunderland/Leeds Cup Final.

Interviewer: When you say you all went round there, is that all of the family?

Darren Isted: Yes. Well, it felt like it was all of the family, and also some other people who lived there. They lived about five minutes away in a place called ____ [0:03:48] [in the] _____. Yes, so there were a number of people. There was that occasion.

Then a few months later, I don't know if you're aware, as a football fan, but when England lost or drew with Poland and didn't qualify for the World Cup, which was a massive anti-climax.

I can remember that night because a lot of people did go to watch it from the same television. There was a feeling that there was going to be a big party, and at the end of it I couldn't quite work out why everyone was kicking the cat, and everyone left very quickly. (Laughter)

That was when I think they lost or they drew, and then Alf Ramsey resigned. It was quite a famous footballing moment.

Interviewer: Did you share the sense of disappointment at the end of that game?

Darren Isted: Yes, I did. I kind of picked up on it and wasn't quite sure why. Then for successive tournaments afterwards I've obviously had it whenever England have played. I think everyone gets that feeling for a day or so, when you feel quite sick in the stomach, when the penalty never goes in or whatever.

Yes, there was certainly an atmosphere which I wasn't expecting, and it occurred, and I didn't quite know why at first. Then you watch the game again and you see why.

Interviewer: Was it a male dominated event, these gatherings round your grandparents?

Darren Isted: No, I think there were women would come round as well. So it was a genuine mixture of family, but also people who... It's not lots of people, but just enough to fill a small living room I think.

Interviewer: Can I take you back to Liverpool then? Can you remember why the decision to try and support Liverpool?

Darren Isted: Wow, this is the psychiatrist's chair.

I think it was presumably because they were successful at the time.

This was very early days, so John Toshack. I think Keegan had only just started to play for them. They had players like

Tommy Smith and Ian Callaghan, people who had been I think in the 1966 World Cup squad.

So they were quite a way back, but they were an up and coming team, and it was a sort of thing...

I don't know why I didn't want to support West Ham. I think it was perhaps some sort of rebellion that I didn't follow what my family had done.

There wasn't a set reason, certainly no connection with Liverpool, but they were becoming a big team at the time.

I think people do it now. They support Manchester United, and Chelsea, and Arsenal etc., and they don't necessarily live there. So I was falling in that trap, and I didn't want to. That's why I kicked back and went to Mansfield

Interviewer: How did you come to Mansfield?

Darren Isted: Mansfield had actually, I think in whatever it is, 1975/1976, won Division Three. Which is the division which Stevenage are in now, actually, which is quite ironic, in old money.

I don't know. I just thought they were quite successful. They were going to be a big team. Perhaps I tried to pick another big team, but a little bit too early on, and as it proved it was a completed disaster, and then they...

Interviewer: Was there a constant sense of disappointment then supporting Mansfield?

Darren Isted: No, because they always delivered disappointment, so you weren't disappointed because they delivered disappointment, so that was fine. (Laughter) They were never going to ever threaten to do anything.

Then I think they got to Wembley in 1987. They played in what was then called the Freight Rover Trophy for Division Three and Division Four teams, and they actually won it.

My family all had a day out. Actually, quite a few people that I know went, because obviously I was fairly renowned as being a Mansfield fan, and there aren't that many in this area. So we had a nice day out on it at the time.

Otherwise though it was just usual non-delivery of success, so it was fine.

Interviewer: So your family supported ultimately your choice of team?

Darren Isted: They supported me. They will support me, of course they will, yes, even though it wasn't West Ham.

I don't think it disappointed my dad too much, but yes, he was quite an ardent... And still is. He's still alive and still supports them.

We're trying to get him back there. He's not been to West Ham for probably about 20 years now, and the whole area has changed quite radically, obviously, when they do go back there, but we will try and get him back to the ground as well for a last hurrah. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Do you remember that Mansfield match, the one where they won at Wembley?

Darren Isted: Oh, yes. Vividly.

Interviewer: Yes? What were your feelings?

Darren Isted: Yes, it was very good. It was ecstatic. It's a normal football thing when you've actually won something.

[We had 0:07:45] the same thing with Stevenage when they won the Conference, and they've gone back to Wembley, or the new Wembley, and won the trophy as well. It's a fantastic feeling.

You pick a club. It doesn't have to be your hometown club. If it means that much to you then you get carried away with them, I suppose. It's only football, but it still means a little bit [more 0:08:03].

Interviewer: What was the game like?

Darren Isted: It was not the greatest of matches, but it went to extra time, and I think it was the first game ever to have gone to penalties. It went to penalties, and it was the first match at Wembley which went to penalties, and they won it on penalties. They won it on a penalty shootout, when they were about to lose.

I think they were something like 3-1 down on penalties. They had to score. The other team had to miss. They had to score.

The others had to miss again. It all worked out that this happened, and then they went and won it in sudden death. So quite a dramatic way to win it.

Interviewer: Yes, it's hugely tense, presumably?

Darren Isted: Yes. Penalties are horrible anyway. Penalties are a terrible way to do it, but in a sense you perhaps don't mind losing on penalties because it's a farce. When you win of course you get extra joy from it, so that's fine.

Interviewer: Who was the star? Who was the person who got the goal that won?

Darren Isted: Well, the star was actually the goalkeeper, a guy called Kevin Hitchcock, who went on to I think play for Chelsea. He was on the coaching team not that long ago actually.

He was the goalkeeper, and basically he stuck his foot out and made a save with his foot. He went the wrong way, but he put his foot out. The quote afterwards was, "We wouldn't have won the Cup if it hadn't been for my size 10½ boots."

We set up a fanzine for fans of Mansfield who were outside of Mansfield around about that time, and it didn't have a name, so it was called 'Size 10½ Boots', which was just a little nod to his save basically.

Interviewer: When you say, "We set up a fanzine", was that your initiative or [Crosstalk 0:09:37]?

Darren Isted: No, there was already a group of people out there. This was in the late 1980s.

I can't quite honestly remember how I came to hear about them, because obviously this is pre-computer, pre-internet, pre-phone days.

I think it may have been literally through reading it in a programme, having gone to one of the Mansfield games and seeing that these people were advertising themselves and putting out a postal address.

No, it was already kind of formed, but I joined them. I think I was at university at the time, but then went on to work in newspapers, so was quite happy to write stuff for them.

It was quite nice. We would meet up and go and watch away games. It was basically for people who lived outside of Nottingham. Do you would attend away games and not too many home matches. Yes, it was quite an interesting group.

Interviewer: What was your motivation for joining? Was it about the club, or was it about getting the practice [in journalism 0:10:30]?

Darren Isted: Yes, [sure] there was a little bit of practice involved, but also it was nice to meet people.

Also you would meet up and go for different games. You would go together. So there would be a group of people who would go.

You would meet up in a pub. They would do London pub crawls. There were pub crawls with six or seven pubs which had...

Mansfield are the Stags. That's their nickname. So they would find six or seven pubs across the whole of London which had the word stag in the title. Ridiculous things like that, along with going to a game.

I think we went to one game in Leyton Orient, in a minor cup, very, very poorly attended. I think there were about nine people in the away end, of which about five of them were Mansfield fans outside [Nottinghamshire 0:11:12], so it was a terrible, terrible turnout. Yes, we would go to those kinds of things.

Interviewer: Did you manage to make a lot of noise, you nine people?

Darren Isted: No, because it was freezing cold, so the only noise you could hear was stamping of feet. As I can recall we lost as well, probably about 3-0 I think, quite heavily. Yes, but you have to go. That's the thing. You have to go to these things.

Interviewer: Do you have to go?

Darren Isted: You do have to go, yes. I don't know why. It's a kind of badge of honour for some of these games.

As you get older, as I get older and not very wiser, then obviously the time can be limited, but even now I'm trying to get to every ground in the football league.

We went to Huddersfield a couple of weeks ago with Stevenage, and I went to Chesterfield earlier on this season as well. It's a nice day out basically. It's a good day out. It also chinks off...

It's a collection. Everyone collects something. [I just 0:12:04] collect a ground and some dodgy memories. Yes, that's what I'm trying to do.

Interviewer: How close are you to collecting all the grounds?

Darren Isted: There are 92, and I'm currently on about 71, something like that, but the whole thing is fraught with danger. If you investigate it, it's a nightmare.

Because there is a 92 Club, but you have to go to the current ground. So I can't go to a ground which is then knocked down. The new ground obviously [doesn't count 0:12:29]. I have to go back to that one.

Also if a ground is changed. We've spoken to people who came to Stevenage earlier this season from the 92 Club, and they say they have to go back to Bournemouth, because apparently the pitch has been turned 90 degrees, and the 92 Club deem that to be now a new ground. (Laughter) It's the same stands, it's the same everything virtually, but because the ground has been turned slightly...

So there is a lot of nonsense involved [I think 0:12:56] ____, but yes, about 20 odd left to go, I think.

Interviewer: Is this 92 Club a formal thing?

Darren Isted: Yes, it's a reasonably well known thing in the football world. They have their own branches. They have their own badges, they have their own ties and cufflinks, so it must be. It's obviously very lady oriented if they have cufflinks. (Laughter) Yes, it's a group I think that [has its own vague [0:13:20] rules and regulations, but it's something a bit more personal.

Interviewer: Yes, I guess so.

Darren Isted: If you mention the 92 Club some football fans may well know what you're talking about.

Interviewer: I can imagine. It sounds like a good fun thing to do I suppose.

Darren Isted: Kind of. I suppose if you've got six-hour return trips for horrible away games, and see your team lose, get stuck in and pay the money, have dodgy pies, drink dodgy beer. It's not the greatest day out, so fun possibly isn't quite the word, but it's still something that's nagging, that you possibly want to do.

Interviewer: Does it have to be one of your teams is playing?

Darren Isted: No, it can be any match, any FA authorised game, so an FA Cup game, a League Cup game, a general league game.

Interviewer: So a determined person could probably do that in one or two seasons?

Darren Isted: I think you possibly could, yes, depending on how fixtures fall. Certainly in a couple of seasons you would. I don't think you would do it in one fell swoop, but yes, it shouldn't take an awful lot to do, to be honest with you.

Every time a new ground is built then obviously these 92 Club people love it, because they're never finished you see. It's a thing you've never actually done, because you can always get something new. (Laughter)

Interviewer: What do you think has been the best and the worst grounds that you've visited?

Darren Isted: Oh, that's a question.

In the football league itself probably Accrington Stanley must be the worst ground, just because it's a terrible ground.

The best grounds? That's a very good question. We went to Huddersfield, as I said, a couple of weeks ago. As a ground, for a team in their position, it's a very lovely designed ground, and it's won design awards.

It's not the most massive of grounds, but it's a very big ground. It's not Wembley, [but it's still big 0:15:13] That probably was about one of the nicest grounds I think we've probably been to see.

Some of the new grounds are nice. We went to Burton last year, which is a vaguely newish ground. It looks like a sort of

concrete mausoleum. It's horrible. It's all flat walls, and it's just wretched.

Some of them are designed well. Some of them are terrible, basically.

Interviewer: What do you think makes a good design? Is it the view of the pitch?

Darren Isted: Yes, well, the view of the pitch is obviously crucial. Nowadays stands are like Stevenage. You can stand anywhere, and you can look at the pitch, and you've got a clear, unfettered view, I think some people went to Brentford last week, and Brentford is slightly more old-fashioned. There are poles, obviously, as you have in older stadiums, and you can sit in a seat where you can't see a goal because there's a pole [and you have to stand 0:15:56].

So a clear view I think is going to happen anyway, for most stands, but design is still quite nice, and you do get some different designs.

Arsenal is a nice design. Obviously the Emirates Stadium is a great stadium.

I went to Benfica a couple of years ago and saw them in their Stadium of Light, and that's very similar to Arsenal's. It's a modern design.

Yes, seeing the pitch has got to be a prerequisite certainly.

Interviewer: I will just save there.

[Break in audio 0:16:22].

Interviewer: Start again.

Can we go on to Stevenage now? Can you remember the first time that you went to a Stevenage game?

Darren Isted: I think it must have been in probably 1980, when they played at the United Counties League here at Broadhall Way. I think it was a group of us, three or four of us from school.

As you look out [crossways now 0:16:44] the east terrace in the middle was a little shed. You may have pictures of it. It was probably about 100yards long.

We sat in there, and I think the first few games of the season we just took lots of chocolate and tried to eat as much as we could. Rum truffles and things, and stuff like this, from [Pearce's 0:17:02] the bakers. We smuggled that in and watched the game as well.

I think I watched most of the games that season to be honest. At home anyway. We didn't see them away, but we came at home.

Yes, and I can't exactly remember the first game, but little snatches of various games throughout. Some of the legendary players of the time.

Interviewer: Had your dad and grandad switched allegiance at all?

Darren Isted: No, they would still stick to West Ham. In fact, my grandparents I don't think were particularly football people, but my dad is very West Ham. Yes, he's been with me over the years to come and watch Stevenage, and obviously they like to see them do well, but yes, he never came as a fan.

Interviewer: Never that interested?

Darren Isted: No, he never came as a hardcore fan, if you like. He wouldn't watch without me certainly.

Yes, we had a number of games that season. There was an 11-0 win I think was the first... That was the club record, which we saw.

I think before the game they were instructed by the manager to shoot. There was obviously something dodgy about this particular team's defence or the goalkeeper.

They had shooting practice in the week before this game, and I think they did shoot on sight, and just shot every time, and they scored 11 times, which was quite good. So they did reasonably well.

Interviewer: Yes. That must have been an amazing match.

Darren Isted: It was, but I can't quite remember it as vividly as I should do. I know I was there. Which is quite strange.

I don't have too many memories earlier on really of Stevenage, apart from actually being there. I can remember the being there, but not lots of memories about the actual game.

I can remember, as I say, the characters. People like Danny Dance, Tim Jolly, Martin Gittings. Who now I sort of deal with newspaper that I work for. He works for another company, and I deal with them in publicity terms.

It's quite funny, because he was a schoolboy legend, a hero of mine, and now you speak to him and he still doesn't quite get it, to be honest.

Yes, I remember the characters, not so much the actual action, in the early years.

Interviewer: Were you an autograph hunter?

Darren Isted: Not really, no. I've never quite been [Crosstalk 0:19:10].

Interviewer: Programme collector?

Darren Isted: Terribly so, yes. A really bad programme collector. It's only been in the last few years, since you start to go through stuff, and changes of life, and divorces, whatever else, and you have these big piles and you think, "Actually, they're probably..."

I've got lots of Stevenage programmes still, but I did have a collection of just general rubbish, which has no intrinsic value, apart from [what I think 0:19:32].

Interviewer: Did you come to Stevenage because they were here and they were close? Or did you start to get behind them as a fan?

Darren Isted: Yes, because they were here. Because I was a Mansfield fan at the time then, but I couldn't get up there, and I didn't actually get to see them at home for another four or five years, until I was a bit older. So this was the closest thing. This was my second team, because it was a little non-league team.

Yes, we came as a fan and supported them. I watched the results through The Comet as well, which is obviously where I've now gone on to work, which is ironic. No, that was the main reason to follow them, because it was local.

Interviewer: Are you conscious of when you first thought, "I want to be a journalist"?

Darren Isted: Probably around about that time I went to a game in Hitchin and submitted a report to The Comet at that point. I think I must have submitted reports on Stevenage, which were never used, because obviously they had got their own correspondents. [They were quite big times 0:20:38]. Yes, around about that time.

Every Saturday I think at about six o'clock/seven o'clock we would get a copy of the London Evening News. They would do a Saturday evening edition which would give you all the football reports and results.

We used to get a copy of that, and I found that was quite magical, that within a couple of hours you could be reading about the games that you've just seen on the television, on Grandstand and World of Sport. The results would come up, and you would have a full report on them.

That used to excite me. I used to think, "If I could do that, that would be just fantastic."

Interviewer: So the exciting thing was the process of creating the news?

Darren Isted: Yes, basically. The watching, the writing, and then somehow that magically turns into print, and then...

At the moment obviously it turns into online copy, which is lazier, but yes, the whole process was an exciting thing.

Interviewer: What made you submit your own reports to the paper? Did you just do that on spec?

Darren Isted: Yes, I just did it on spec, because I wanted to do it, because I wanted them to be published.

I think that's one of the key things as well. You like to see your report with your name published as well. That's the first thing. Which dies a little bit when you are in the media, but before you get there to see your name, and to see your stuff in print, is fantastic, and that encourages you to do more.

Interviewer: When was the first time you saw your name in print?

Darren Isted: Ooh, I don't know. I had appeared a couple of times earlier. I think when I was at school at Camps Hill. I was in the junior school, so I was probably only about nine or ten.

We were asked to do a piece on vandalism. There was a little piece on vandalism about the mid-1970s, because there was quite a spate of it then. In the summer the kids would come in and demolish schools, if you like. It was far worse than it actually is now, which is quite interesting. I remember there being a terrible ____ [0:22:25].

There were some sixth-formers from a local school, I think it was Nobel, and then there was me, and probably three or four other nine or ten year olds.

The Gazette came in and got our perspective, so our picture was in the paper, and some views on vandalism I think as well, which is quite interesting. So that was one of the first times I was in the paper.

In terms of reports, I think it was probably when I came back from university and wrote for a paper called the Herald. I went to see the Herald, who were based in Stevenage, and they didn't have anyone doing Stevenage reports, so I started to do home games for them.

Interviewer: How did you make contact with the Herald?

Darren Isted: I must have literally just phoned them up. As soon as I came back I wrote letters out to as many papers as I could.

Once I had done a bit of work experience with them I think I wrote to about thirty/thirty-five newspapers asking for a job. I kept the letters, actually, for quite a while, because I got replies from some.

I actually, in the end, had two offers. Everyone else didn't have a job, but out of those thirty-five there were two offers of work.

One was from The Comet, ironically, and the other one was a paper in North Devon. (Laughter)

Interviewer: You went for The Comet, obviously? (Laughter)

Darren Isted: Well, I went to North Devon for an interview, because I thought it would be a nice day out. The paper was the North Devon Gazette, but I looked at the sports pages, and on the sports pages, which is where I wanted to head, they also did sheep trials. (Laughter) Yes, well, sheep dogs. Yes, sheep trials. I just thought, "I can't see myself standing in a field writing that", so I stayed closer to home.

Interviewer: Had you done any reporting while you were at university?

Darren Isted: Yes, I did some bits and pieces for the actual student magazine.

There's a guy who was sort of in our family, I think he's my dad's cousin, Barrie Keeffe, who was a bit of a playwright in the 1970s. I think his biggest claim to fame was the film The Long Good Friday. He wrote that. He wrote the screenplay to that. I managed to get hold of him and do an interview with him.

I did a few things like that, but nothing major. Nothing for the newspapers where I was at university.

Interviewer: What was it like getting that first job?

Darren Isted: Yes, it was good. I had been there doing work experience, and basically someone had moved on, and I was offered the job. No [real 0:24:42] qualifications.

Yes, it was fantastic. It was money, really. It was a question of I wanted to be a playwright, that was what I wanted to do, but actually that wasn't going to happen, so I use words in another way.

Interviewer: Can you remember how much you were paid for that first job?

Darren Isted: Yes, £5,000 a year.

Interviewer: A princely sum.

Darren Isted: Yes. This was in the late 1980s, and it's not radically improved for journalists. Journalists get paid a very bad wage, I have to say, but there are so many people who still want to get into it that they will carry on doing it.

Interviewer: Was it very competitive in the 1980s?

Darren Isted: Yes, because, as I say, there were just so many people that want to do that. I don't think it's ever changed. I don't think there's been ever a period when it's gone down.

People do want to do it so much that newspaper companies are able to pay, for what is a very skilled job, for people who have to write, have to be very creative, and also try not to get sued, not the greatest amount of money. I think it's about £15,000 now that people start on.

Interviewer: Were your parents proud?

Darren Isted: Yes, they were very proud. It was a shame, because I was very close to my granddad, who had actually just died. I was actually working on the paper doing work experience, and then he died literally weeks before I was given the job, which is a bit of a shame, but yes, they're very proud [to do that 0:26:07].

I don't know what the expectations were coming from [Collenswood] School, which is my local school in Stevenage. They probably weren't the greatest. So to get into a newspaper it was probably quite nice to do university first and then do that ____ [0:26:25].

Interviewer: What was the nature of that first job? What were you expected to do every week?

Darren Isted: It was just as a junior reporter, so it was absolutely anything. Learning your patch. Learning your craft, if you like. Which was great.

Then within a few months of that, because I had shown an interest in sport, I did sport on a Monday, so I would help the sports editor, and I would write the reports that came in, and turn those around for him.

Then after that it was all news, but they sent me out on jobs. I think in the 1980s there was a thing about Rottweilers. There was a big problem with devil dogs, as they liked to call them.

I'm okay now, but I was at that time petrified of dogs, so they sent me out with a photographer to do the piece to a Rottweiler breeder, [as they do 0:27:08]. Which was fine.

She had her dogs on one side, and then the photographer, who is still working with us now, [Alan Millard], said, "Why don't you get him to hold the dog?" So they got the biggest, fattest, Rottweiler to jump up on my shoulders, and I had to cuddle this thing as he's licking me. (Laughter) It was horrible. It was on the front page. I've still got a cutting of it.

It's things like that. They do that kind of stuff.

You do death knocks, which we don't do now, but when someone's died you would go knock on the door of the family. Which is a terribly intrusive thing to do. It's still done to a degree, but it's just done through the police now.

Then you would go and knock on the door of someone who has just had a family member, a child, die, and just ask what they're feeling. Which is a very strange thing to have to do, but you know. (Laughter)

Interviewer: How did you feel when you had to do that sort of thing?

Darren Isted: Oh, I think all journalists don't like doing it, but they will do it. It's not the kind of thing I refused to do, or anyone refused to do, because you're not really a journalist if you're... You've got to be a bit hardened to it.

There have been occasions when we've got the number from the phone book of a family of someone who has died, or someone who has died, and phoned the number, and you've actually got the answerphone message of a dead person saying, "I'm not here at the moment. Leave a message. I will get back to you." "No, actually, you won't, because..."

Yes, so there's some bizarre digging around that you would have to do, which I don't think is done now to as great a degree.

Interviewer: What was the atmosphere in a newsroom like for a junior reporter? Is there a lot of ribbing?

Darren Isted: No. I think at the moment it's a lot of work. At the time it was you're expected to do what you're told to do. So you're sent out on any kind of job, or if there's a press release or whatever that needs to be done, you do it. In those days it was a little bit more...

It was a smoking office as well, which was another major change. Everyone smoked at that time, and you didn't really understand it until there was a vote and it was decided you couldn't smoke in the office ____[0:29:03].

Yes, it was quite pressurised as you get to press day, but it still is, even to this day. Wednesday is our press day. I've worked on a number of papers and Wednesday has always been the press day. So for me Wednesday of every week is a nightmare, because everything seems to be compressed.

It's also the quickest day of the week. Because I get in at 9:00am, and within an hour it's about 7:30pm, and you've run out of time, (Laughter) so you've got to get it finished.

Yes, you're expected to do everything as a junior, which I think is quite right.

Interviewer: Is there an equivalent of sending the junior reporter out for a left-handed screwdriver?

Darren Isted: No. No, we've never done that. We wouldn't take the mickey out of them in that way, but yes, I've heard of those.

Interviewer: Did anyone do it to you?

Darren Isted: No. I can't think that I was actually maltreated like that. I think they tried to get me to go on some jobs.

I know there was one occasion. It wasn't me. There was another reporter from the rival paper.

We went to the fire brigade. We used to go to the fire brigade and the police station every day, every morning, to do the calls, as they are called, and anything that's happened.

I got on very well with a guy called Mick Barnaby, who is a very well-known Stevenage character, who died about a month ago. The whole [of the Old Town of 0:30:19] Stevenage actually came out and gave him a round of applause as his coffin drove past. It was fantastic.

He was a fire officer then. This is about 20 odd years ago. He said to me, "You will never guess. I just spoke to the girl from the Gazette. She is so stupid. I told her that we've just had to..."

They're going to write a story, but they won't until they start phoning up of course.

"We had to rescue a horse who had managed to get on the roof of a barn he had climbed on."

I think they did try these things with some people, [luckily it wasn't 0:30:48] me, but they did try. Of course they told them, and she went off, and they gave her the contact for this farm who was going to say, "Well, no, of course not. What are you talking about?"

They would try some things. Different people would try it.

Interviewer: What was the worst bit and the best bit of your initial job?

Darren Isted: Oh. What was the worst bit? I don't know. I don't think there were any particular parts that I would hate to do.

I suppose, as you say, dealing with death isn't the greatest, but you get to do it, so that was never really an issue.

The best parts were having obviously a story on the front page, and an exclusive story as well. So when someone tells you something, and they say to you, "Don't tell anyone else, but...", and you know this is going to be an exclusive story, then that's a fantastic feeling. You're just telling people. Even to this day you get the same feeling.

It's like being a gossip in a pub. I'm just telling you, and I'm the first to tell you, so it's a nice feeling. Yes, that was always the best part of the job, I think.

Interviewer: You mentioned that when you were a junior, and you were working on the sports desk, you would get in reports and then you would write up from there. Who did the reports come in from and what was the process of writing up?

Darren Isted: It was the same as we probably do today. We've got lots of correspondents. Our sports team basically have lots of correspondents for each sport. So the swimming club, the different football clubs, hockey, rugby, will all send a report in.

In the good old days, they would post them in or they would phone them over. So they would be phoned over. Someone would give you a call, and then you would take it down, basically, take down the copy.

About the time that I got in, literally the first week that I started was the first week they moved over from typewriters to computers. So I was quite lucky. They were called Apricot computers.

It was a little bit sad, but quite funny, because obviously lots of the people who had been in the press for 30/40 years when I first joined, so they had started in the 1930s or 1940s, were completely all at sea. Because they were used to typewriters, and now they had got these machines that they really couldn't get to grips with.

Also the fax machine came into its own around that time, so reports would either be phoned over or they would gradually start to get faxed across to you, and then you would just rewrite them, basically.

They would be sent to the printers, and the printers would run them out on a linotype machine, and it would be made to fit.

The headlines were written on paper. The stories were written to the degree that you would say, "That probably needs about 300 words." The headline you would kind of guess, through spacing, how much you would have.

Now we just have the space, we key it into the box, and that's it. We key the copy into the box until it actually fits to the line, and then we know that's all we've got. So it's radically changed.

Interviewer: What was the process after you had written your piece? Did somebody then edit that [or were you trusted 0:33:53]?

Darren Isted: Yes, it would always go to the editor, or the sub-editor, or the sports editor if it was the sport. They then would read that. That would then be proofed by someone else.

You would get what you call pairs of eyes looking at a piece, and it was obviously a bit of a badge of honour. The more pairs of eyes you had looking at something the less chance there was of an error in it.

Nowadays it's completely reversed. Reporters will write a story, and it goes online straight away. The point is to get the story out to your consumers as quickly as possible.

If you were a journalist, and you wrote a story, it would previously have had to go through five or six people who read it.

Now you will read it and no-one else will probably see it. It will just go straight online. So it's fraught with danger. Obviously you then have to trust your reporters to get it right. "Get it right first time" is the mantra.

Interviewer: How do you train juniors under those circumstances?

Darren Isted: Well, juniors have always been trained. They always come to us with what we call pre-entry qualifications. So you have qualifications in law, public administration, how the councils work. They have to have 100wpm shorthand as well.

So they always come to us with a degree of knowledge and qualification, and then you train them on the job, obviously. They spend about eighteen months/two years before they become fully trained and they become what we call senior reporters, and pass a second set of qualifications, but during that time they're obviously trusted to get it right. I wasn't quite trusted as much in my day, as it were.

Interviewer: When did you move over to start reporting on football matches yourself?

Darren Isted: Well, I had already done that. As I say, I had done that previously. I had worked for the Herald as a sort of freelancer. I asked for money, and they wouldn't pay me, which was a great bugbear. (Laughter)

In fact, one occasion, I was here in the late 1980s, and the manager at the time they called Brian Williams, who was a former teacher, a very Welsh teacher. He was also renowned for being very abrasive.

As I say, I was a freelancer, and didn't have any money or anything of that nature, and I went to get a quote from him afterwards, and he [said 0:36:08] "Are you the bastard who

wrote that for the Herald? Do you write the headline?" I said, "Oh, no, I don't write the headlines." "Come with me."

He dragged me. He literally dragged me around the side of the pitch, and where there is a bar in the corner of the east terrace, to the left used to be a Portakabin where the players used to get changed.

He dragged me along into the changing room, and it was literally the changing room just after a game. All the players were standing there. They were getting changed, so they were in various states of being naked.

He then proceeded to tell me that the headline, which I hadn't written, for a paper that I didn't really work for, was a disgrace, and, "I want you to apologise to our goalkeeper", because the headline obviously blamed him for something. The goalkeeper is standing there naked, and I had to say sorry to this guy.

(Laughter)

So it's quite an abiding memory. It's probably one of the few times I've had to face up to something like that. You don't usually do that in the media, but in those days this guy just dragged you in and made you say sorry. (Laughter) Yes, that was an early time.

Interviewer: What was that experience like?

Darren Isted: That was very bad. Yes, it was terrible, when you come face to face, and it wasn't even something I had done, but you come face to face with the reaction that newspapers have.

I don't think newspapers do realise even now the impact they can have with stories that are positive or negative. You do

them in good faith, but it's always going to affect someone in some way or another, and I don't think we still appreciate that even to this day.

That was quite a salutatory lesson for me, that you face up to people. (Laughter)

The goalkeeper wasn't particularly fussed at all, but the manager obviously was, yes, bless him. But we got on okay after that.

Interviewer: Does it change your response and the way you do things when you encounter things like that?

Darren Isted: It does if it's genuine, and if it's valid, but sometimes people will have a go or they will complain because of their own self-interest, or because they're trying to hide something, or because they don't like the story because it's probably true and they have been found out.

It shouldn't do, but that can actually drive you on to be determined to do even more, and dig even further, but no, sometimes it can.

We had a case where we did a story on someone who committed suicide in front of a train.

The story was written, and I don't know, someone may have raised the issue, "Was it a bit graphic?" and the reporter, who was a junior reporter, had clearly just sensationalised it and probably shouldn't have done. It was printed, and then the family complained, and you look at it and you think, "Actually, yes, you're quite right."

In the end it went to the Press Complaints Commission, and the family came in and they spoke to them, and saw them face to face, and apologised face to face to them. It was something that shouldn't...

It was okay to print, but not in that particular style, but I think it's only when you actually see people, and the impact it's had, that you realise how far you reach, how far you can go.

Interviewer: How did your career develop from doing these reports freelance and then moving on to a junior place at The Comet? Where did you go from there?

Darren Isted: I was a junior reporter at The Comet for a few years, and then had the dreaded children, so I needed more money. (Laughter)

I said to the editor at the time, "My wife is pregnant, so I may well be looking for another job, because I don't think the money here is enough. Unless there's any chance of..." He just said, "Well, good luck then. I hope you find another job." "Okay."

Then I got a job as a sports editor. At the time I was just a junior reporter, but I got a job as the sports editor at a group of papers called [The Heralds 0:39:40], who are based in St Albans, in Porters Wood. They [started paying me here], and everywhere, basically. So that was my first foray.

I was in charge then of all of those sport pages for those papers. So it's the first time I what you call [subbed] pages, so you design them and put the pictures on, and secondly that I was responsible. I was in charge. So it was quite a good time.

Interviewer: Yes. What does a sports editor do precisely?

Darren Isted: Everything and nothing you could argue. You could argue that he relies on lots of copy coming in from other people, so he doesn't actually write anything, but is actually fully responsible at the end for everything.

[Break in audio 0:40:24].

Interviewer: We should talk more about Stevenage then.

Darren Isted: Let's talk about Stevenage and football.

Interviewer: When did the association with Stevenage really pick up, and is it personal relationships that are created when you are sports reporting on a particular club?

Darren Isted: Yes. When you're actually a fan as well then that adds to it. Obviously I started to, as a sports editor, cover the team. I didn't cover the team massively then.

I then moved on to another paper, a paper based up in Bedford, and also one in Milton Keynes, ironically, at that time. I then started to cover them for Three Counties Radio, which meant I went home and away, to all the games, and then it got quite in-depth.

At that time, I was doing other things as well. I was doing freelance work for a press agency, and also for public

relations, Melanie Faldo, who was the first wife of Nick Faldo. Also for Sky as well. So lots of other things at the time took off.

Interviewer: What sort of reporting were you doing for the radio? Was it commentating on the match?

Darren Isted: Yes, it was match day commentary. It was basically bits and pieces. Takes of the game as it went on.

Then there were some days when other teams weren't playing and Stevenage were. Because it was in the Conference it was free, you didn't have to pay for the rights, so you could do a full match commentary. So I started to do that.

That was the thing which I enjoyed, and that culminated in the Newcastle game. The first time they played Newcastle here I was actually lucky enough to be one of the commentators.

There were two commentators. The other guy was a friend of mine, who I had brought through, a guy called David Croft, who is now the Formula 1 commentator for 5 Live. Yes, we both commentated on that first Stevenage/Newcastle game together.

Interviewer: How did you prepare for that commentary? Particularly the Newcastle game, [if we could talk about that 0:42:11].

Darren Isted: It's like anything. It's preparation with notes. So you go through who you think is going to be playing, each individual player. It's a bit of a John Motson thing. You have about three facts with each player. Obviously their age, their appearances, things of

that nature, how many goals they've got. Then some facts about the teams themselves as well.

The key thing when you're commentating, which a lot of the commentators don't do, 5 Live and the hideous Alan Green in particular, is that they don't tell you what the score is and where the ball is.

I just think that's absolutely crucial to know what's actually going on, but a lot of the time now it's opinion. People like to give their opinion on how good or bad things are and how terrible the players are. It's not about that. It shouldn't be about the commentator. It's all about the game.

Interviewer: How do you view the role of the commentator then? Is it the eyes of-?

Darren Isted: You're painting a picture. That's all you do, is paint the picture, and you just tell them what's happening. You shouldn't be giving your opinion on the performances, but you're just saying what's happening.

If you're doing it for a local radio station, about a local team, you will be biased. I think that's what's supporters expect to a degree, a little bit of bias.

Interviewer: So the supporters want to hear that?

Darren Isted: Well, I think they do, as long as you're not doing it through rose-tinted spectacles. I think you're focusing on your team. Perhaps bias isn't the right word, but focus on that club, so that

they're getting far more than the other team, but you've got to tell it warts and all as well.

Interviewer: What did you expect from that game?

Darren Isted: I think we felt like we were going to get beaten, probably badly. I was commentating on the first half of each half, so within two minutes I had commentated on Alan Shearer scoring, so we thought, "That's it. That's [the lot 0:43:47]." (Laughter)

Then they sort of dug in, they held on, and then they scored, and then the second half kind of went really without anything happening.

It was funny, because the same thing happened last year when Newcastle came again. We watched the game and didn't really have a great deal of expectations, but they just did fantastically, and they didn't really look like they were going to lose from early on.

Interviewer: What was the atmosphere like when Shearer scored that first goal?

Darren Isted: Just everything went [down 0:44:17]. (Laughter)

Interviewer: What did you do as a commentator? Does that stop you?

Darren Isted: Well, the bravado kind of goes, because you're hoping that there's not going to be a rout.

You can be defensive as a commentator as well, which is quite strange, because the team becomes defensive, so they don't concede more. Similarly, you become defensive. You're not as outgoing or you don't have any bluster. So it looks like they might get the hiding they deserve.

Interviewer: When they equalised, what were your celebrations like?

Darren Isted: Well, I wasn't actually commentating at the time. We were doing split halves, and I didn't have that half.

Yes, jumping up and down. We had a guy in-between us called Paul Barrowcliff, who used to play for Stevenage only a few years before then, and he was jumping up and down, and it was hugs all round.

Which is what you do. That's one of the strange things about football. You end up hugging fat, hairy men, that you probably wouldn't normally consider hugging.

Interviewer: No, absolutely. (Laughter)

Can I talk about your relationships with the players?

Darren Isted: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you form personal relationships with the players?

Darren Isted: Yes, some of them you do. With managers as well.

Paul Fairclough, who I think is supposed to be here today, absolutely fantastic, an absolute god as a supporter, but also as somebody who works with the media. Sometimes they can be great people but not be good with the media. He was really good.

Richard Hill was a manager. Mad as a spoon. Absolute fruitcake. (Laughter) Maddest manager you ever met, but he was okay. In terms of personal relationships, he was fine, because you kind of knew what to expect.

Yes, you do form relationships with some. Sometimes we've had problems. We had problems a year or so ago over a story that went in, which we felt was justified, and we've never sought to cause problems, but the manager didn't like it, the player didn't like it, and-

Interviewer: What was the story?

Darren Isted: I thought you would ask that. (Laughter)

It was basically a player who had scored on the first day of the season, the first game in the football league, and I think he then didn't play.

He was deemed to be possibly fringy, but played the first game, scored the first game. He then didn't play after that, the next game, didn't start.

We just said, "That's a bit surprising. We thought you would be playing. Are you surprised?" He did. He just said, "Yes, I am a bit surprised I didn't play. It's a bit of a mystery."

So we quoted that as, "So-and-so is surprised", and then we were accused of causing rifts and trying to cause problems.

People say things to the media, and in hindsight, when they see it in print, they realise that is exactly what they've said, but they realise the impact of it isn't actually that great. Then it can either be a case of, "It wasn't said", or whatever else.

That happens generally anyway. That's fine. We don't want to fall out with people. It was all kind of smoothed over, but not until rude words were shouted in a press box up in Bradford and things like that. But that's fine. We get that. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Who was doing the shouting?

Darren Isted: The manager. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Did you shout back or were you very calm?

Darren Isted: No, I could understand he was upset. He has one eventual aim, and that's the success of a club, and anything that – whether it's right or wrong – puts them off, then he doesn't want it, so that's fine. No, it was all okay.

We've got to live with these people. If you work on a national you don't care, because they don't have to do stuff on Stevenage or whatever, so they can say what they like, but we have to report on them every week. We give them three pages every week. If that was pulled, or if we didn't cover them and they lost that publicity...

We've both got to work with each other, so it's fine. [It works that way 0:47:44].

Interviewer: How did the association with Sky come about? You said you had done some work for Sky?

Darren Isted: Yes, actually one of the people years ago lived in Harpenden, and he had heard me on Three Counties. I happened to write a letter, to ask if there was any chance of work, and he said he had already heard me, and he was a commissioning guy.

Yes, I just did some commentaries for the Saturday programmes. They send you around different grounds. That was when I didn't cover Stevenage but Crystal Palace, and Oxford, and Swindon, and other matches. Yes, that was quite interesting, that era, as well, that time.

Interviewer: Can you say what's been your favourite game or favourite Stevenage game to write about or commentate on?

Darren Isted: Oh, God. I should have thought about this, shouldn't I? What's been my favourite Stevenage game to write about or commentate on? I don't know.

The game which always comes back to me is a match at Welwyn, which I ended up getting in the national newspapers for. It's about 1997 when I went to the ground.

I was one of the first ones there. I spoke to the chairman and his – it turned out it was his brother. I didn't realise it was the chairman.

I went back in again. I went back, I thought, "I need to get a programme from them", and I asked him for a programme, and said, "Oh, it's obviously a free programme." He said, "Yes, it is

free, but we shouldn't give it to the media, because you only write lies about us."

I shouldn't have responded, but I did. I just said, "Well, if your ground wasn't such a toilet then you wouldn't have such bad press." I know I shouldn't have said that. I walked away.

As I walked away I was grabbed from behind, and literally almost thrown down a flight of stairs and kicked out of the ground.

I was working for Three Counties Radio at the time, and I had a mobile phone on me, which was a rarity. I phoned up the studio and told them I had just been kicked out. It was about 1:45pm. "What shall I do?" They said, "Hold on the line. We will give you a call."

I expected to be driving back home. The next thing I knew I was live on air with the guy doing the programme saying, "Sensational news. He's just been kicked out of the ground. What's happened?" So I then ranted, libelling everyone.

Then they said, "Can you not see the ground, Darren?" There was a fence with a slight hole in it by a bus stop, and if I stood on top of the bus stop I could see. So throughout the first half they made me commentate through a crack in the fence at Welwyn, because I had been thrown out. People queueing up at the bus stop had no idea what was going on.

One of the local news agencies in Luton always listened to Three Counties for the football and just general news, and that ended up in the Telegraph, and the Daily Star, and all sorts of things.

So probably my most memorable game, for all the wrong reasons I would have to say, (Laughter) but yes, it was quite incredible [that whole thing 0:50:22].

Interviewer: Is there a memorable game for sheer sporting prowess?

Darren Isted: It sounds like there isn't, because I can't really think of anything, but then I should have thought about this to be honest with you. (Laughter)

Probably the most telling game was we had been in the Conference for about 15 years, and then perhaps was it two years ago we went to play Luton away?

This was probably in October time. I think it was actually a day before my birthday, or the day after, which is the end of September, so [whenever, end of 0:50:51] September.

They were going to be our main rivals that year, if we had a hope. We had held on, and it was a very close game, and then literally within about five minutes of the end we scored. I think we scored at the Stevenage end.

I think that was probably the most joyous, because I don't like Luton. I really have never liked Luton Town. It's a scummy old club from another county.

Also that kind of was a signal, and that meant that we had the rights to be the best team in the league.

So I think in terms of that, in terms of just joyousness and everything else, that would probably be my favourite game, Luton Town away.

Interviewer: Marvellous.

END AUDIO

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